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## Right Seeing: Means and End in Patristic Monastic Lives

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#### ABSTRACT:

Right seeing is a central motif in the biographical *Lives* of Saints Antony and Macrina. 'Right seeing,' used here to signify the alignment of one's vision with truth, is manifest variously as 'the discernment of spirits,' as firmly hopeful trust in the revelation of the divine, and as perceiving the world from the divine perspective.

Manifest in these ways, right seeing is both a guide for ascetic training the telos of which is union with God, and it is the fruit of that very union with God unto which askesis aspires.

## Right Seeing

### Means and End in Patristic Monastic Lives

by Jason Horstman

*Is there any reason why a person who has observed the commandments of God should not also know of God's secret designs? "The man who unites himself to the Lord becomes one spirit with him," we read in Sacred Scripture.*

*Holy men do know the Lord's thoughts, Peter, in so far as they are one with Him. This is clear from the Apostle's words, 'Who else can know a man's thoughts, except the man's own spirit that is within him? So no one else can know God's thoughts but the Spirit of God. To show that he actually knew God's thoughts, St. Paul added: 'And what we have received is no spirit of worldly wisdom; it is the Spirit that comes from God.' And again: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart*

*conceived, the welcome God has prepared for those who love him. To us, then, God has made a revelation of it through his spirit."*<sup>1</sup>

Right seeing is a central motif in the biographical *Lives* of Saints Antony and Macrina. 'Right seeing,' used here to signify the alignment of one's vision with truth, is manifest variously as 'the discernment of spirits,' as firmly hopeful trust in the revelation of the divine, and as perceiving the world from the divine perspective. Manifest in these ways, right seeing is both a guide for ascetic training the telos of which is union with God, and it is the fruit of that very union with God unto which *askesis* aspires. Our aim here is not the epistemological or metaphysical truthfulness in the confessional beliefs expressed in these *Lives*. Rather, our goal is to explore how this theme of right seeing plays a defining role as both guiding principle and telos within the *Lives*.

#### ANTONY AND RIGHT SEEING

The motif of right seeing is present throughout the *Vita Antonii*. The ordering principle for Antony's life is the love of Christ above all things. This single, central belief is present within the two revelations which Antony receives prior to his ascetic career. His fixed vision on Christ above all things is the guiding force for his askesis, and it is central to his teachings and his battle against the demons. Distinct from the underpinning of this guiding principle—namely, Christ above all things—right seeing will be a key weapon in thwarting the efforts of the demons.

St. Antony's monastic life begins when he receives a divine word which orders the trajectory of the rest of his life. Walking to church, he had been reflecting upon the apostolic life, how the apostles gave up everything to follow Christ, and how the early Church sold their possessions for the common good of those in need. At church he heard the Gospel passage, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell all your possessions and give to the poor, and come follow me, and you will have treasure in heaven."<sup>2</sup> Understanding that his reflections and the Gospel were the revelatory word of God spoken directly to him, he immediately responded with obedience to the word and in emulation of

1 Gregory the Great. *Life and Miracles of St. Benedict*. Translated by Odo J. Zimmermann and Benedict R. Avery. Liturgical Press: Collegeville. 1949. Chapter 16.

2 Athanasius. *The Life of Antony*. "The Greek Life." Translated and Edited by Tim Vivian, Apostolos Athanassakis, and Rowan Greer. Cistercian Publications: Kalamazoo. 2003. Paragraph 2. Mt. 19.21



the apostolic example. In another reading of the Gospel at church, Antony received further divine instruction: “Do not be concerned about tomorrow.”<sup>3</sup> Receiving this revelation, Antony committed himself wholly to the ascetic life, freeing himself of as many mortal attachments as possible by giving away all of his possessions and arranging for his sister to be cared for by a community of “well-known and faithful virgins.”

As part of his ascetic training, Antony studied under well-respected, time-tested ascetics in the region, and thus progressed on the “road to virtue,” growing in ascetic discipline, almsgiving, prayer without ceasing, study of Scripture, zeal, graciousness, lack of anger, and love for humanity.<sup>4</sup> This new way of life for Antony is predicated by the belief that life and virtue are found in Christianity and that the words of Scripture are a source of living revelation. The testimony of the apostolic community and his ascetic mentors anchor his askesis to a tried and true path to union with God. At this early stage, Antony’s way is validated by the reputation it garnered him in the community—“he was loved by everyone,” and “he acted in such a way that he saddened no one but caused them even to rejoice for him. When everyone in the village and those with whom he associated—everyone who loved what is good—saw Antony, they would call him ‘God-loving.’ Some would embrace and kiss him as ‘son’ and others as ‘brother.’”<sup>5</sup>

It is at this point that Athanasius describes the devil’s first attack on Antony.<sup>6</sup> The devil’s purpose in this attack was to lead Antony away from the ascetic life. To this end the devil’s first salvo was to raise up “in Antony’s mind a great dust cloud of thoughts, wanting to separate him from his ability to make correct choices.”<sup>7</sup> Said another way, the central objective of the devil is to prevent Antony from seeing clearly. After Antony resisted this attack through resolve, faith, and unceasing prayer, the devil redoubled his efforts using fleshly temptations. These efforts were thwarted through faith, fasting, “reflecting on Christ in his heart and the goodness he had through him, and reflecting on

the spiritual insight given to him by his soul,”<sup>8</sup> fear of perdition, and above all, the “grace of God that is in [him].”<sup>9</sup> Having resisted these first attacks, Antony gains some traction against the devil—we are told that the devil—given the epithet “the Deceiver”—was driven out of Antony’s heart, so that it “could no longer mount an attack with thoughts.”<sup>10</sup> Being unable to attack Antony interiorly, the devil resorts to illusory forms in order to engage Antony. Antony finally takes the victory and forces the devil to flee when he gives thanks to God, declares the devil’s impotence, and chooses to ignore the devil.<sup>11</sup> Two observations should be made here. First, that Athanasius describes this episode with vocabulary directly connected to sight: the devil, whose primary characteristic here is ‘Deceiver,’ uses obfuscation in order to disrupt Antony’s vision, ultimately for the purpose of derailing Antony from his calling as an ascetic—askesis being the path of virtue to which Antony was called. Second, ascetic practice itself alongside fixing his attention upon “Christ in his heart” and “the spiritual insight given to him by his soul” were integral to dissipating the devil’s obfuscating dust cloud and ensuring the clarity of Antony’s sight. If deceptive thoughts are a dust cloud, then askesis is a tether which keeps Antony from being blown away,<sup>12</sup> and Christ and the spiritual truths Antony has already learned are the cairns upon which he can fix his eyes in order to keep going in the right direction.

Though the devil was driven off, demonic attacks would persist throughout Antony’s life. To better resist these temptations, Antony leans harder into askesis in order to master his body so that it will not be weak and fall, through deception, to sin. In keeping with the theme of deception, Antony resolved to be “pure in heart and prepared to obey only the will of God, and the will of no other.”<sup>13</sup> Underpinning these dynamics is the conviction that cultivating purity of heart, which is the telos of askesis, culminates in seeing God, as is taught by Jesus in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”<sup>14</sup>

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3 Ibid. para 3. Mt. 6.34

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid. para 3, 4

6 Ibid. para 5

7 Ibid.

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8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid. para 6

11 Ibid. para 7

12 That said, it should be noted that there is a circular relationship between vision and askesis in this episode. Right vision keeps Antony going in askesis, but askesis is what clears Antony’s vision.

13 Ibid

14 Matt 5.8 (New Revised Standard Version)

From here, Athanasius shows us Antony's battle with the demonic forces in the tomb.<sup>15</sup> In the tomb the demonic entities take on a multitude of forms in their abuse of Antony. One of the thoughts which anchors Antony in this battle recalls the episode in the story of Job in which the devil had no power to oppress Job without the assent of God.<sup>16</sup> This highlights the will of God as a super-eminent reality from which all else, even the attacks of "the Enemy," is ordered. It is Antony's capacity to perceive and to cling to this reality that allows him to persevere through the demonic attacks in the tomb. A second observation to be made here is that despite the apparent reality of bodily harm being done to Antony in the tomb, Antony is clinging to a greater, unseen reality that these demonic forces are essentially impotent and that God is essentially in control despite the feedback being provided him by his sense perception.<sup>17</sup>

Following the episode in the tomb, Antony begins his trek to the desert fortress to continue his askesis.<sup>18</sup> Two specific temptations occur during his journey. The first is the illusory shape of a large silver dish and the second is the presence of a vast sum of real gold. The temptation of the silver dish is thwarted when Antony discerns that it is a work of the devil. There is a sense in which Antony's ability to rightly see through this deception is the result of reflection and good reasoning: "How did this dish get here in the desert? The path is not worn, nor are footprints of any travelers here. If someone had dropped it, it would have been impossible for him not to notice it because it is so large. No, whoever lost it would have returned and looked for it and found it because this place is deserted. This is the work of the Devil!"<sup>19</sup> The temptation of the real gold was overcome by Antony's training in askesis, as that of an athlete, and because he "really did not care about money."<sup>20</sup>

15 Ibid. para 8

16 Job 1.6-12

17 Ibid. para 9. "Antony, lacerated and stabbed by the beasts, felt even more terrible bodily suffering, but lying down without moving he was even more vigilant in his soul. He groaned because of the pain in his body, but was in control of his thoughts and, as though he were mocking the demons, said, 'If you had any power in you, one of you would be enough. But since the Lord has taken away your power, you attempt to terrify me any way you can by sheer numbers. Mimicking the forms of irrational beasts, as you do, only demonstrates your weakness, however.'"

18 Ibid. para 11-12

19 Ibid. para 11

20 Ibid. para 12

Antony's fixedness upon Christ above all things is the reason for his disinterest towards the gold, for it was Christ above all things which originally prompted him to forswear all worldly possessions at the beginning of his ascetic life. It is also critical to note that askesis plays a central role in capacitating Antony to live into his vocation to love Christ above all things by stripping away conceit and vanity<sup>21</sup> while also training Antony up in virtue. Antony sees things as they really are—the silver was rightly perceived as a trap which would lead Antony away from his goal; the gold, whether it was a trap or not, was weighted in comparison with Christ, and the worth of it was rightly judged as insignificant when compared with the value of claiming Christ.

Having arrived at the desert barracks, Antony battles the demonic spirits present in that place. Other people had followed Antony to the barracks and were fearful of the sounds of battle they heard within. Antony explains to the people that their fear attracts or invokes attacks from the demons, but the remedy is for the people to perform the sign of the cross over themselves. Antony's instructions here may recall to the reader the first epistle of St. John wherein it is taught both that God is love<sup>22</sup> and that perfect love casts out fear.<sup>23</sup> My purpose in noting this connection is to highlight how Christ is utterly antithetical to the demonic forces encountered in the *Vita Antonii*. This dialectic is expressed another way in the linguistic play between *logismoi* and *logos*. In other patristic literature, such as in the writings of Evagrius Ponticus, the evil thoughts and temptations of the Enemy are referred to as *logismoi*.<sup>24</sup> Contra these *logismoi* is the *Logos* or Word Incarnate which is Christ.<sup>25</sup> Whereas the *Logos* is the substantial being from which all things derive their substance, *logismoi* are the ephemeral dust cloud of thoughts which obfuscate and lead to ruin. There is a certain quality of non-being in the *logismoi* which is evident in the essential impotence of the demonic forces which come against Antony throughout the *Vita*. And the consistent remedy

21 Freedom from vanity seems to be a key insight here. Vanity can be taken as a disproportionate valuing of something because of false perceptions of its worth. In this case vanity is a kind of deception about things, whereas Antony sees things rightly as they are. He pursues Christ above all things because nothing is worth pursuing when compared with Christ.

22 1 Jn. 4.8, 16

23 1 Jn. 4.18

24 Harmless, William. *Desert Christians: an Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2004. 318-329

25 Jn 1.1-5

to the attacks of these demonic forces? Anchoring oneself in the reality of Christ, who is essential being, consistently is the source of victory<sup>26</sup> in the *Vita*. Connecting this major theme in the *Vita* to the motif of right seeing is the presentation of Antony ordering his life *by* and anchoring his life in the supreme reality of Christ, and his capacity to discern what is substantive in life and what is illusory.

Twenty years later, Antony emerges from the desert barracks. His appearance to those around him serves as evidence of the rightness of the path which Antony traverses towards virtue, appearing totally balanced and healthy in body and mind and soul.<sup>27</sup> Athanasius specifically notes that Antony's "soul was pure," recalling his earlier resolution to be pure of heart, the result of which, per the Beatitudes, is seeing God. Antony's ascetic life had achieved the aim for which it was intended. Moreover, the reader is given to understand that Antony has been given special knowledge from God: "Antony emerged as though from some shrine, having been initiated into divine mysteries and inspired by God."<sup>28</sup> Antony's special knowledge from the divine is a kind of right seeing.

The ordering principle of loving Christ above all things emerges in Antony's opening exhortations to the crowd who pulled him out of the desert barracks.<sup>29</sup> Likewise does the superseding divine reality emerge as an early exhortation, once again indicating Antony's perception of a reality beyond that which is presently visible.<sup>30</sup> Antony's vision of the ascetic ideal spreads and a community of monks springs up in that location as others begin their own ascetic journey along the path of virtue.<sup>31</sup>

26 In this episode the victory is effected specifically through the sign of the cross.

27 Athanasius, para 14. "When those people saw him, therefore, they were amazed to see that his body had maintained its natural condition, being neither fat from lack of exercise nor weakened from fasting and fighting with demons; they found him just as they had known him before his withdrawal. The character of his soul was pure, for it had neither been contracted by suffering nor dissipated by pleasure, nor had it been afflicted by laughter or sorrow. Moreover, when Antony saw the crowd, he was not bothered, nor did he rejoice at so many people greeting him. Instead, like someone guided by reason, he maintained his equilibrium and natural balance."

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid. "...telling everyone to prefer nothing among the things of the world to love for Christ."

30 Ibid. "...reminding them of the good things to come and of God's love for humankind that has come to us..."

31 Ibid. "Having left their homes, they registered themselves for citizenship in heaven."

Following this, Antony teaches the community in a lengthy speech which extends from the 16th paragraph of the *Vita* to the 43rd paragraph. Much of the speech concerns right seeing, whether as it pertains to the apprehension of reality as it really is, or as it pertains to the discernment of spirits. ¶17 contrasts present suffering with future glory, anticipating a future reality which will be made manifest, but is as yet invisible to those who do not see it. From this assent to an unseen reality follows an exhortation unto ascetic discipline in anticipation of that reality in ¶18. ¶19 teaches that a life ordered by the view that Providence is in control of everything, including one's own life, produces virtue. ¶20 concerns the nature of virtue as something to be cultivated within oneself, contra a Greek view that it is something outside of oneself which is to be sought.

¶21 commences a discourse on demons, their nature and tactics, and the means to defeat them. Antony indicates that his own experience in combating demons makes him an authority on the topic.<sup>32</sup> To be an authority suggests that one has a mastery and a clarity of vision concerning a thing. Moreover, that Antony is able to go into detail suggests an intimacy and a comprehensiveness of knowledge. Antony's correct response to demons and *logismoi* further suggest that he sees things as they truly are—Antony sees rightly.

Demons do not have power within themselves to compel people, but rather through apparitions and deception seek to obfuscate the truth and lead people astray, the counter to which is prayer, askesis, and discernment.<sup>33</sup> The core concepts illuminated during the devil's first attack on Antony are expanded and given prominence for a significant portion of the text. That such a large portion of the *Vita* is couched in the language of sight—using words such as 'dust cloud,' 'apparition'—is suggestive of the importance of seeing clearly. Against "filthy thoughts" Antony prescribes prayer and fasting; against apparitions designed to instill fear: knowledge that they are nothing,

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid. para 22

faith, and hopeful<sup>34</sup> resolve.<sup>35</sup> Against the devil's prideful boasting: knowledge that his words are lies and ignoring him.<sup>36</sup> The ascetic must be cautious of deception and employ discernment even with respect to positive behaviors, and be aware that evil might be laced with truth.<sup>37</sup> A rubric for discernment is whether or not a word produces virtue, indicating that virtue is a guidepost for evincing right seeing.<sup>38</sup> One reason for the ascetic life is that it draws one into one's pure and natural state, which in turn yields clear vision.<sup>39</sup> Demonic voices are to be ignored no matter what, and the sign of the cross is to be made in order to drive them off.<sup>40</sup> ¶40 once again indicates that Antony's perseverance is grounded in the love of Christ: "Many times the demons struck me and beat me, and I would say, 'Nothing can separate me from the love of Christ!'"<sup>41</sup> As a help when apparitions appear, Antony encourages asking the apparition, "Who are you and where are you from?"<sup>42</sup> in order to show imperturbability, but it may be reasoned that this line of questioning is also a means of getting to the reality of the matter, as earlier Antony's speech concerns the discernment of a spirit as angelic or demonic.<sup>43</sup>

There are three interconnected elements which gain prominence after Antony's *anachoresis* in the desert barracks: miracles for the benefit of others; visions, prescience and special knowledge; and teaching and orthodoxy. Each of these elements expresses something about the motif of right seeing.

Miracles worked through Antony for the benefit of others emerge in ¶48, 54,

34 Faith and hope are intimately connected to right seeing in the New Testament writings. Faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen," (Heb. 11.1), and "we hope for what we do not see," (Rom. 8.25). When Antony was first attacked by the Devil, he clung to the victory of Christ even while the battle was ongoing—he had faith in an unseen reality. Before he had attained purity of heart he stayed true to the way of askesis in the hope of obtaining the end of askesis—"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus," (Phil. 3.12-14).

35 Ibid. para 23

36 Ibid. para 24

37 Ibid. para 25, 26, 31

38 Ibid. para 33

39 Ibid. para 34

40 Ibid. para 35

41 Ibid. para 40

42 Ibid. para 43

43 Ibid. para 36

56, 57, 58, 61, 62, 70, 71, 83, and 87. These miracles are worked in cases of both physical unwellness and in cases of spiritual unwellness. Though the miracles are effected through Antony, it is stressed that Antony is not the cause of the miracles, but rather it is Christ who works them. This is evinced in the episode in which a girl is cleansed of demonic attacks when her father calls on Christ:

*[Antony said], "Man, why do you cry out to me? I am a man, just like you. If you believe in Christ, whom I serve, go and pray to God according to your faith, and what you seek will come to be." Immediately the man believed and called on Christ and went away, and his daughter was cleansed of her demon. The Lord, who says, "Ask, and it will be given to you," also did many other deeds through Antony. A crowd of those who were suffering, when he would not open the door, would simply sleep outside his monastic cell and, believing and sincerely praying, were cleansed."*<sup>44</sup>

It is also seen in Antony's explicit diminution of his own role in healing acts:

*Those who suffered he encouraged to be patient and to know that healing belonged neither to him nor to any human being at all, but to God alone, who acts when he wishes and for those whom he wishes. Those who were suffering, therefore, received the words of the old man as healing, learning also not to lose heart but to have even more patience. And those who were being healed he taught to give thanks not to Antony but to the Lord alone."*<sup>45</sup>

In these two quotations it is evident that Antony is, at most, an instrumental cause in the working of miracles, whereas Christ is definitively the effective cause of them. This along with the importance of faith in order to invoke miracles indicates the importance of right seeing, by emphasizing the true way that miracles work. In this sense, faith seems to be right seeing of God's character and will in the specific reality of the person of whom faith is required.<sup>46</sup> While sense perception sees the world as it seems now to be, faith sees it now as it will be after it is transformed by God. Moreover, this accentuates that Christ is the definite object of right seeing, a notion

44 Ibid. para 48

45 Ibid. para 56

46 Refer to footnote 34.



supported throughout the *Vita*, and expressed repeatedly through Antony's elevation of Christ above all things. While one's natural inclination would be to see the world for its faults and incompleteness, Antony sees Christ alone.

A third quotation from the *Vita* is illuminating concerning miracles and right seeing:

*[Antony] was so much help to everyone that numerous soldiers and many wealthy people laid aside life's burdens and from that moment became monks...Antony was like a physician given by God to Egypt, for who ever went to him sad...and did not come back rejoicing? Whoever went mourning his loved ones who had died and did not right away lay aside his grief? Whoever went angry...What poor person in his despair went to meet him...What monk, losing heart... What young person, when he came to the mountain and set eyes on Antony, did not immediately have his love for pleasure dried up and learn to love moderation? Whoever came to him tempted by a demon and did not find relief?...[Antony] had a gift for discerning spirits, for recognizing their movements and seeing what compels each of them and what makes them eager to hatch plots. Not only was Antony not mocked by them, he taught those whose thoughts were troubled by spirits how they could turn away the plots of the spirits, describing in full the villainies and weaknesses by which they operate. So each person, as though he had been anointed by Antony, returned to face with confidence the devices of the Devil and his demons.<sup>47</sup>*

Here we may note the description of Antony as "like a physician given by God." The role of a physician is to make whole what is diminished or damaged, suggestive of a sense of *apokatastasis* present in these works.<sup>48</sup> This work of healing requires faith and anticipates an unseen future reality which is not apparently extant in a present context. Moreover, we see that the actualization of miracles is a direct result of discernment, discernment itself being the right seeing of the nature of unseen realities.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. para 87, 88

<sup>48</sup> *Apokatastasis* is hinted at elsewhere in the *Vita*, as in Antony's peaceful relationship with the animals at the inner desert (para 51). Both elements of the scene (inner desert, peace with animals) in ¶51 reflect the ideal state of the garden of Eden.

Visions and other types of special knowledge, such as prescience, are a second feature of the *Vita* after Antony's time in the desert barracks. These appear in ¶57-66, 82, 86, and 88. This special knowledge is something given to Antony by God, strengthening the rightness of Antony's sight by grounding it in divine revelation. One purpose of this special knowledge is for the greater facilitation of Antony's ministry, as when it allowed Antony to give special, specific instructions to Fronto for the man's healing,<sup>49</sup> and when it enables Antony to answer truly when asked questions.<sup>50</sup> In a sense, saying that Antony receives special knowledge from God is a way of saying that he is seeing from the divine perspective.<sup>51</sup> God as *ipsum esse* may be expected to have perfect understanding of the truth of reality. Thus, union with God, which is the result of the path of virtue, necessarily results in one such as Antony having himself something approaching a perfect understanding of the truth of reality.

Teaching and orthodoxy are other prominent elements in the *Vita*. Teaching is one of Antony's major activities. It is on display in ¶54, 55 66, 84, 89, 91, as well as in the entire substance of his speech in ¶16-43. Much of Antony's teaching concerns askesis, which serves to foster virtue and to safeguard it against *logismoi*.<sup>52</sup> It is noted that Antony teaches what is profitable,<sup>53</sup> which may be contrasted with what is useless, vain, or ephemeral. That teaching is one of Antony's major ministries highlights the importance of knowing the right things. Antony has seen rightly, which is confirmed by miracles and by the revelation of his transformed nature after emerging from the barracks. The result of his right seeing is union with God. Teaching others how to see rightly is the means of helping them towards union with God.

The rightness of Christian religion, as well as rightness *within* Christian religion take center stage in ¶68-80 as Antony rejects utterly the heretical teachings of the Melitians, the Arians, and the Manicheans and shows Christianity to be superior to Greek philosophy and pagan religion. In these intellectual

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. para 57

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. para 66. The text would seem instead to emphasize askesis in provoking visions: "They learned that ascetic discipline bears good fruit and that often visions come as a consolation for labors."

<sup>51</sup> Gregory the Great, ch. 16. While great care must be taken not to imprint Gregory's ideas upon Athanasius' writing, this image of union with God and seeing from the divine perspective is illuminating when exploring the same themes in the *Lives* of Antony and Macrina.

<sup>52</sup> Athanasius, para 55

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. para 54

battles there is a parallel to the battles that Antony previously had against the demons earlier in his life. Against the evil thoughts of *logismoi* which clouded his vision, Antony fought back with the clarity of the true *Logos*. Against false beliefs, Antony declares the true faith of Christianity. Contra the Arians at Alexandria, miracles serve to testify to the veracity of Antony's position by means of power, indicating that Antony is the proponent of a belief that actually corresponds with the way reality actually is.<sup>54</sup> In speaking with the Greeks and pagans Antony argues that the mind<sup>55</sup> is superior to letters, and so being taught of God, ergo direct revelation, is superior to whatever arguments may be derived by argumentation because 'letters' are derived by mind, and thus secondary and inferior.<sup>56</sup> This episode echoes the relationship between *Logos* as real *in se est*, and *logismoi* as derivative and ephemeral. As against the Arians, Antony appeals to power and authority as testimony of the reality of his religion versus the philosophers' dependence upon syllogism.<sup>57</sup> In all this, the claim is being made by the text that Christ, unobscured and unadulterated, pure and real, is above all things and to be desired above all things, and that Antony has the right perspective by choosing Christ above all things. As Socrates is wiser because he rightly sees the single irreducible truth that he does not know anything,<sup>58</sup> Antony is wiser because he rightly sees the single irreducible truth that Christ is above all things.

#### THE CENTRALITY OF HOPE IN THE RESURRECTION FOR MACRINA

As Antony fixed his eyes singularly on one central truth, so too did Macrina. There is a single defining truth which orders the entirety of St. Macrina's life and Philosophy: the hope of the resurrection. This is the belief that Jesus has defeated sin and death, that Jesus has risen again, and that creation will be resurrected through Jesus' death and resurrection. Everything that was separated from God through sin and death will be restored to God through

54 Ibid. para 70, 71

55 'Mind' is conceptually closely related to *Logos*.

56 Ibid. para 72, 73, 77

57 Ibid. 79-80

58 Plato. *Five Dialogues*. "Apology". 2nd Ed. Translated by G.M.A Grube. Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis. 2002. Para 21.d. "I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know."

Jesus.<sup>59</sup> Death is not something to be feared or grieved over, because it does not actually have any power. There are two categories into which we may organize how Macrina's firm hope in the resurrection ordered all else: 1. How she lived and taught, 2. How she dealt with death.

#### RIGHT SEEING AND MACRINA'S WAY OF LIFE

After the death of her betrothed, Macrina deigned to live in permanent companionship with her mother, St. Emilia, as a means of safeguarding her decision to remain alone for the rest of her life. As the mother of a large family and the mistress of a large estate, Emilia had no end to practical and material responsibilities concerning the raising of children, the management of the estate, and the paying of taxes following the death of her husband, St. Basil the Elder. We are given to understand that these responsibilities were oppressive to Emilia: "In a variety of ways...her mother was distracted by worries."<sup>60</sup> Macrina worked to share these responsibilities with her mother and thus provide for her a boon. Yet there is a further way in which she aided her mother—"she provided her mother with an impressive leadership to...the goal of philosophy, drawing her on little by little to the immaterial and simpler life."<sup>61</sup> This philosophy, the hope of the resurrection, served to calibrate Macrina and Emilia's vision with regard to the exigencies of life, helping them to attend rightly to things physical and things spiritual.

We gain more insight into the quality of Macrina's life when her brother St. Basil the Younger adopts the ascetic life as well:

*He withdrew from the worldly show and began to look down upon  
acclaim through oratory and went over to this life full of labors  
for one's own hand to perform, providing for himself through his*

59 Callahan, Virginia Woods. "Introduction to 'On the Soul and the Resurrection'". In *The Fathers of the Church: St. Gregory of Nyssa, Ascetical Works*. Vol. 58. Translated by Virginia Woods Callahan. Catholic University of America Press: Washington D.C. 1999. 196. An important aspect of St. Gregory of Nyssa's presentation of the theology of resurrection is that of *apokatastasis*: "a return to a former state of perfection." In the *Life of St. Macrina* it is seen in Macrina's prayer acknowledging humanity's restoration to the garden of Eden, "You opened up for us a path to the resurrection... You who broke the flaming sword and compassionately gave Paradise back to the man crucified with You, remember me also in Your kingdom, for I, too, have been crucified with You."

60 Ibid. "The Life of St. Macrina. 167

61 Ibid.



*complete poverty,<sup>62</sup> a mode of living that would, without impediment, lead to virtue.<sup>63</sup>*

From St. Gregory of Nyssa's description of another of Macrina's brothers, Naucratus, we observe the telos of the monastic life with which the family was so taken. Withdrawing from the "noises of the city, military activities, and the business of rhetoric in the lawcourts," in order to live a "life of monasticism and poverty," he "freed himself from all the usual distractions of human life," and did works of charity, "and thus he made his way to God by following divine injunctions."<sup>64</sup>

Later, Gregory of Nyssa describes the transcendent, decidedly otherworldly and utopic quality of the monastic community whom Macrina led:

*Just as by death souls are freed from the body and released from the cares of this life, so their life was separated from these things, divorced from all mortal vanity and attuned to an imitation of the existence of the angels. Among them was seen no anger, no envy, no hatred, no arrogance, or any such thing; neither was there in them longing for foolish things like honor and fame and vanity, nor a contempt for others; all such qualities had been put aside. Continence was their luxury and not being known their fame; their wealth consisted in their poverty and the shaking off of all worldly abundance like dust from the body. They were not occupied with the concerns of this life; that is, they were not preoccupied. Rather, their one concern was the Divine...*<sup>65</sup>

What freed them from the concerns of this world and ordered their lives towards the spiritual was the hope of the resurrection which gave them eyes to see what really matters, and so "gave them additional aids for

discovering goods leading them to greater purity."<sup>66</sup> Out from the hope of the resurrection comes a kind of death from worldly things unto a new spiritual life,<sup>67</sup> reflecting and participating in the death and resurrection of Christ.

A miracle which happened during Macrina's life further highlights the motif of right vision and right belief. In this story a young girl's physical sight is miraculously restored. The wonder of the restoration of physical sight dissolves the girl's father's doubt—in a sense healing his spiritual sight.<sup>68</sup> Gregory of Nyssa continues to explain that more miracles were fulfilled in Macrina's life, but he chooses not to share them, lest they be a stumbling block to those without the experience or eyes to see them: "I do not think it is wise to add to my story all the other details...for most men judge the credibility of what they hear according to the measure of their own experience, and what is beyond the power of the hearer they insult with the suspicion of falsehood as outside the truth," and "for the material-minded, they are beyond what can be accepted."<sup>69</sup>

Macrina's way of life was an ascetic one; simple, austere, consisting of labor with one's own hands, charity, and worship. It was disinterested in the material, temporal things of this world, and instead focused upon the immaterial and spiritual world—the building up of virtue unto the goal of union with God. All of this is ordered from Macrina's foundational belief in the resurrection—anticipating the life to come caused her to be disinterested in the pressing concerns of the material world while instead using her time in this life to prepare herself for things eternal and to live as those already in union with God.<sup>70</sup> In her living and in her dying, her hope in the resurrection was a belief from which everything else flowed. In the *Life of St. Macrina*, coming to see things in the right way is the lynch pin for everything else.

## RIGHT SEEING AND DEATH

Macrina was betrothed to a young man who had a promising career as an orator and lawyer ahead of him, however he was taken away by sudden

62 Ibid. 184. For one thing, poverty serves as a refutation of the distracting, tempting things of this world. For another, it is a bold declaration of belief that it is not what treasures are stored up in this life that matter, but what treasures are stored up for the eternal life: "She recognized one storage place for private wealth: the treasury of heaven. There she deposited everything and left nothing behind on earth,"

63 Ibid. 167ff

64 Ibid. 168ff

65 Ibid. 170ff

66 Ibid. As in Antony, this recalls the purity unto which Antony strove and which Jesus promised would allow us to see God.

67 Ibid. "Just as by death souls are freed from the body and released from the cares of this life..."

68 Ibid. 190. "I, also, then comprehended the miracles in the gospel which I had not believed before and I said: 'What a great thing it is for sight to be restored to the blind...'"

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid. "Their existence bordered on both the human and the incorporeal nature,"

death. Gregory of Nyssa highlights how peculiarly<sup>71</sup> firm was Macrina's refusal to be married to anyone else. The reasons for this refusal were twofold. First, she considered the betrothal to be equivalent to actual marriage.<sup>72</sup> Second, because of the hope<sup>73</sup> of the resurrection, "she insisted that the young man joined to her by her parent's decision was not dead, but living in God...merely off on a journey and not a dead body."<sup>74</sup> Her belief in the resurrection overrode the apparent reality of her fiancé's death, and thus she concluded that it was her duty to keep faithful as to one who is not currently present, rather than one who is dead and reduced to nothingness, trusting in the greater unseen reality of the resurrection rather than what her natural eyes tell her.

After Macrina began living the monastic life, her brother Naucratiu, who had also committed himself to the monastic life, died. Gregory of Nyssa speculates that this was the result of the machinations of the Adversary. The loss was devastating to the entire family, but especially so to their mother, who, despite being "perfectly schooled in virtue," was utterly beaten down, "like a noble athlete felled by an unforeseen blow."<sup>75</sup> Her breakdown is described as "reason giving way to passion,"<sup>76</sup> and it is by Macrina's own firm hope in the resurrection that she is strengthened and "lifted out of the abyss of grief, and, by her own firmness and unyielding spirit, she trained her mother's soul to be courageous," by "directing [her mother] by her own example to patience and fortitude."<sup>77</sup> This patience and fortitude should not, however, be mistaken for stubborn stoicism. Rather it was Macrina's witness to an unseen, prevailing reality, the resurrection, which drew her *beyond* the reality of her son's death into the transcendent reality of the good that was before her: "Macrina's life, always exalted by virtue, did not give the mother an opportunity to grieve for the one who was absent and caused her to rejoice rather in the good that was present."<sup>78</sup>

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71 Ibid. 166 "...her decision was more firmly fixed than her age would have warranted."

72 Ibid. "She called her father's decision a marriage on the grounds that what had been decided had actually taken place."

73 See footnote 33. Hope is a kind of seeing the unseen.

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid. 169

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid. 169ff

78 Ibid. 170

That there was a reality behind Emilia in the death of Naucratiu and a greater reality in front of her in the hope of the resurrection illuminated by Macrina indicates that there are layers to reality. Not everyone has eyes to see the deeper layers of reality, as Gregory suggests when he chooses not to elaborate upon the miracles which took place in Macrina's life. The idea of layers of reality, or of layers or sight into reality, emerges early in Macrina's life. As a young woman, Macrina was renowned for her incomparable beauty.<sup>79</sup> Her beauty showed forth even though it was veiled, and thus obscured. Moreover, there is a transcendent, illimitable quality to her beauty, for,

the hand of painters could not reproduce its perfection, and the art that devises all things and dares the greatest things, even to the fashioning of planets through imitation, was not powerful enough to imitate the excellence of her form.<sup>80</sup>

Here her beauty is a metaphor for the sublime mystery of the resurrection: captivating and illuminating even when not completely grasped, and with layers between the viewer and the subject upon which the viewer's vision is fixed. The metaphor goes further, for who is it that has the hope of seeing Macrina unveiled? The man who is betrothed to her is one known for moderation and great promise.<sup>81</sup> This recalls that the path of virtue is the way to union with God, that the pure in heart are the ones who will see God. A similar metaphor emerges even earlier. During Emilia's youth we are told she is "extremely virtuous, following the will of God in all things and embracing an exceptionally pure and spotless way of life."<sup>82</sup> As with Macrina, Emilia is greatly desired and greatly sought after for marriage. But who is chosen to be united with her in marriage? A man "well known and recommended for the dignity of his life."<sup>83</sup> So in Macrina's youth and in Emilia's we see a metaphor for the beautiful, transcendent reality of the divine. It is veiled, and thus not yet fully known, but the path of virtue brings greater clarity of sight towards the divine reality and, ultimately, union with God.

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79 Ibid. 165

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid. 166

82 Ibid. 164

83 Ibid.

The rightness of Macrina's belief is emphasized at the death of her brother St. Basil. She is "greatly disturbed by such a loss," but the event is described as a crucible experience: "Just as they say gold is tested in many furnaces, that if it gets through...and, in the last is finally cleansed of all extraneous matter... something similar happened in her case."<sup>84</sup> What is tested and refined by the deaths of her mother and her brothers<sup>85</sup> is her hope in the resurrection; "her lofty understanding," is what had been "tried by the different attacks of grief, the genuine and undebased quality of her soul was revealed in every way."<sup>86</sup>

Even at the setting of her own time in this life Macrina remained steadfast. While Gregory is sorely disturbed by his sister's imminent death, she is interiorly altogether tranquil. Her fixedness on the hope in the resurrection anchors her rationality, producing this tranquility: "She rehearsed such arguments, explaining the human situation through natural principles and disclosing the divine plan hidden in misfortune, and she spoke of certain aspects of the future life as if she was inspired by the Holy Spirit."<sup>87</sup> This she did in order to lift up and fortify Gregory and the others present.

It bears emphasizing the quality of Macrina's belief in the resurrection as an overriding, super-eminent reality. All other facets of reality, even death and, literally, taxes,<sup>88</sup> must conform to the reality of the resurrection or they must be rejected. Indeed, her belief itself in the resurrection as a foregone, concrete reality seems to play a part in actualizing that reality.<sup>89</sup> Others are drawn closer into the spiritual sphere by her belief, as at the end of her life: "[By their discourse on the higher philosophy] my soul almost seemed to be lifted up out of its human sphere by what she said and, under the direction of her discourse, take its stand in the heavenly sanctuaries."<sup>90</sup>

Macrina herself, so resolute and transformed by her right belief in the resurrection, was like a victorious runner in a race who, even before receiving the crown by the judges, acts as though they have already obtained the prize,

84 Ibid. 173

85 Her fiancé is not mentioned at this part of the text.

86 Ibid. 173

87 Ibid. 175

88 Ibid. 167

89 Ibid. 171. "Their existence bordered on both the human and incorporeal nature."

90 Ibid. 175

rejoicing, "for she was already looking towards the prize of her high calling and, in her words, almost echoed the words of the apostle: 'Now there is laid up for me the crown of Justice which the just Judge will give me since I have fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith.'<sup>91</sup> Later, on the instant of her death, Gregory and the members of the community lose themselves to grief—described as a loss of reason.<sup>92</sup> Gregory describes this loss of reason as "just and reasonable," for they mourned not merely the loss of an "ordinary bond or carnal attraction," but because they had been separated from their own guiding light, the one who anchored them in the hope of the resurrection and the life of virtue:

*[They mourned] as if they were torn away from their hope in God or the salvation of their souls, they cried out and loudly bewailed as follows: 'The lamp of our life has been extinguished; the light that directed the path of our souls has been taken away...With you even our night was illuminated like day by the pure life, but now even the day is turned into darkness.'*<sup>93</sup>

That this passage uses so much "seeing" language accentuates that right seeing is a central motif in the *Vita*. For Gregory to say that their grief was just and reasonable shows that for them to lose the light of their lives was a true catastrophe for the community. That this loss is disastrous shows how foundational right seeing is as a cornerstone of their lives and their faith.

But it is Macrina's own steadfast example of order and tranquility flowing from her fixed belief which finally draws them back to themselves: "[Gregory said] Look at her...and be mindful of the instructions she gave you for order and graciousness in everything."<sup>94</sup> As with Antony, Macrina's vision was fixed and singular upon the one transcendent reality more important than anything else:

*The day was almost over and the sun was beginning to set, but the zeal in her did not decline. Indeed, as she neared her end and saw the beauty of the Bridegroom more clearly, she rushed with greater*

91 Ibid. 177

92 Ibid. 182

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid. 183

*impulse towards the One she desired, no longer speaking to those of us who were present, but to that very One toward whom she looked with steadfast eyes.*<sup>95</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Right seeing is not only a ubiquitous motif in the *Lives* of Saint Antony and Saint Macrina. Right seeing is the keystone for the messages put forward by Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa in the *Lives*. In Antony's life, he was set upon the path of virtue when his vision was first made clear. His vision was made clear by the divine revelation given to him indicating that Christ should be his sole focus. What follows from that singular focus was an ascetic life which attained for him virtue and drew him into union with God—God who is *ipsum esse*, being itself, essentially real and essentially true. Fixed vision upon Christ—the one true *Logos*—capacitated him to weather the storms of deception, distraction, and temptation which otherwise would have blown him off course. His singular attention to Jesus served as the ordering principle which enabled him to navigate with discernment the many and diverse movements of the *logismoi*. The proof that he 'got it right' is in the virtue which he attained, in the miracles that demonstrate with power that Antony was aligned with true reality, in the visions and words he received from God which evince that he was seeing things from the divine perspective. The result was that his vision served as a guide and a help to others along the path of virtue, that true calling of humanity. Antony went into the desert, a territory occupied by the enemy forces of demons and *logismoi*, and conquered it through his fixed sight on Christ above all things, so that a community of monks, traveling along the path of virtue, sprouted in the middle of the desert.

For Macrina, the hope of the resurrection was the single guiding truth which defined the rest of her life. Seeing the truth of things—namely, that the hope of the resurrection is an overriding reality which supersedes and defines all things—led her to poverty, because this life is fleeting, and the only worthwhile storehouse is in heaven. It led her to askesis, because this world's goods are vaporous and the only goods worth valuing and building up are the virtues, the value of which is eternal. It fortified her in the face of

death, because while the physical eyes may see a corpse, the eyes of hope in the resurrection see beyond the present reality of death to the anticipated reality of the resurrection. When her faith was tried, applying her attention all the more steadfastly to the hope in the resurrection pulled her through. Her vision led and anchored an entire community in the life of virtue. That this community is described as living an angelic life indicates that their life was one aligned with the transcendent reality of the spiritual sphere. The *logismoi* do not explicitly enter Macrina's story, but filling a similar role is the lure of despair at the event of death. As Antony faced false thoughts by being centered on the true *Logos*, so too does Macrina meet the apparent reality of death with calm resolve because hope in the resurrection is her grounding reality which overrides what is before her natural eyes.

What has this to do with people today? For everyone, it is a reminder that the issues of life cannot be separated from the issues of truth. Truth is almost certainly on most of our minds. In the United States there is often a sense of disillusionment and suspicion towards the media and politicians: it can seem that everything is spun or slant or obfuscated in order to achieve one agenda or another—the relationship of that agenda to truth being tangential at best. It is not uncommon for individuals to struggle with their identity, wondering: Who am I? What defines me? Do I have worth? We may wonder at the value of how we spend our time—is my hobby a good use of my time? Is my career fulfilling? Does it matter that I spend several hours a day scrolling social media? If the *Lives* of Antony and Macrina are any indicator, figuring out the right way to see things is a good starting point for answering all these questions. Socrates asked Euthyphro, "What is the good?" If we can find the super-eminent realities which order life, if we can fix our eyes on those truths, they can begin to order our lives along the lines of what truly has substance and, therefore, of what truly matters. If that happens, all the questions of our lives may start to find their answers. The message on right seeing in the *Lives* is also a warning to be cautious and discerning—we ought to introspect and consider that what we think or what we feel may not, by default, represent the truth or what is actually good for us or for our world.

For Christians in particular, the specific theological messages within the *Lives* should be compelling. Christ, the *Logos*, is the *axis mundi* about which

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid. 179

pivots not just the whole of human experience, but indeed the whole of existence itself. That the hope of the resurrection supersedes even the oldest enemy of humanity—Death—should be a font of courage and of peace. The consequences of right seeing—union with God, the attainment of virtue, imperturbability, fulfillment—should make taking up their crosses and following Christ<sup>96</sup> an idea that is alluring and enticing. The ancient calls of the Church should not be stuffy, tired Sunday school mantras that have been repeated again and again, but rather electrifying news that a new, restored, fulfilling life is what lies ahead. The journey begins when we, “come and see.”<sup>97</sup>



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96 Mt 16.24-26

97 Jn 1.39